

CHRISTIANS IN THE QUR'ĀN AND THE SUNNA

**An assessment from the sources to
help define our relationship**

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Abbreviations:

EI *Encyclopaedia of Islam*

SEI *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*

H After Hijra

INTRODUCTION

The Aim

This paper has but a single purpose: to help formulate a basis on which we as Muslims, faithful to the Qur'ān and the Sunna, can define our relationship with Christians. Both the sources and the method of this paper are determined by this goal.

The Sources

It is obvious from the theme of this paper that the Qur'ān and the Sunna are its twin sources. To assist understanding of the Qur'anic verses presented and to place them into their proper context, some reference is made to the *tafsīr* literature, though only to authors who are said to belong to the 'classical' period.¹ As for the Sunna, the collections of *ahadīth* had to be supplemented by the *sīra* literature, for two reasons: firstly, although a *hadīth* reports on the sunna, *hadīth* and sunna are two different matters;² Secondly, it is the arrangement of various reports on the Prophet's* words and actions in the *sīra* literature, which helps us to better understand the sunna.

1. For a brief introduction to the history of the *tafsīr* literature, see Göttje, H.: *The Qur'ān and its exegesis*. London, 1976, introduction.
2. See Azami, M.M.: *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature*. Indianapolis, 1977, p.3, ff. where both sunna and *hadīth* are explained.

* Blessings of Allah and peace be upon him. (The author offers this salutation every time the Prophet's name is mentioned.)

for our present purpose.³ Wherever the English translation of any quotation was available, I have quoted from that published source, in order to make the task easier for the reader not familiar with Arabic. At times, however, I had also to refer to untranslated books of *hadīth* and *tafsīr*.

The Method

For the sake of defining our relationship with Christians, we consult the Qur'ān and the *Sunna*. In order to better understand the Christian religious community, we shall look at it from three viewpoints, namely in a theological perspective, a legal perspective and a societal perspective. This paper does not intend to give a picture of what the Qur'ān says about Jesus, his mother, birth, life, mission and crucifixion. Also the Islamic refutation of the Christian concept of trinity will not be dwelt upon, since all these are familiar to both Muslims and Christians taking an interest in Christian-Muslim relations. Rather this paper aims at presenting the Prophet's approach to Christianity and Christians. We shall thus try to recollect and summarize the major encounters that the Prophet had with Christians. It is obvious that this method obliges us to keep close to our sources and to quote from them adequately, since

we need to collect and review our material, before we draw conclusions from both the Qur'ānic revelations related to these encounters and the Prophet's actions or reactions to them, bearing in mind that our relationship with Christians involves the three perspectives mentioned above, i.e. the theological, the legal and the societal.

Finally, it should be noted that this paper is only a first step and that I intend to come back to the issues raised herein at some later stage, discussing the materials presented and the conclusions drawn in more detail.

3. Wensinck's *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* proved to be quite insufficient for our purpose. Although there are 50 entries under '*ahl-kitāb*', it is disappointing to find that '*al-nasārā'* (the Christians) does not occur at all, although there are a number of *ahadīth* referring to them, and we shall quote some of them in this paper. Wensinck lists only one *hadīth* as reported in al-Bukhārī and elsewhere (see e.g. Robson, J., Vol. 1, p.26), stating that it is the parents who make a child become a Jew or a Christian etc. (see Wensinck, Vol. VI, p.462, under *nasara*). Similarly, the place name '*Najrān*' which is to be found in the collections of *hadīth* a considerable number of times, does not occur in Wensinck. See Wensinck, A.J. et al., Vol. VI, Leiden, 1967.

PART I: STOCKTAKING

Early Encounters

Presumably there were many encounters between the Prophet and the early Muslims on the one hand and Christianity and Christians on the other, or at least there must certainly have been more encounters than our sources report. A narration such as the following by 'Ā'isha makes plain that the early Muslims had some direct interrelation with Christians, at least to the extent that neighbourly ties were not ignored. The *ḥadīth* is as follows:

It is narrated about 'Ā'isha that she said to 'Urwah: 'My nephew! We (the members of the Prophet's family) (spent our days thus) sometimes we saw three successive moons (i.e. two months elapsed) and the oven was not lighted in our houses.' ('Urwah relates that he asked her:) 'How did you remain alive then?' 'Ā'isha replied: 'We lived on dates and water. Indeed there were a few Christian neighbours of the Prophet who had some milk cattle. They (occasionally) sent him milk as a gift and he used to give some of it to us also.' (Bukhārī and Muslim).¹

However, long before the hard years after the *Hijra* in Madina, Christians played some part in the life of the Prophet and the nascent Muslim community, and it is well known that the *sīra*-literature refers in at least two instances to what one might call the 'affirmative' role of Christians towards the Prophet of Islam.²

1. Nomani, p.277.
2. We shall confine ourselves in the following pages to the narrations about Bahūra and Waraqā, but see Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, pp.146-7, and Ibn Hishām, pp.82-3 for the episode referring to the monk Naṣṭūr.

The Encounter with Bahīra

The meeting between the young Muhammad, when accompanying his uncle Abū Ṭālib on a trade journey to Syria, and the monk Bahīra is mentioned in both Ibn Hishām's *Sīra rasul Allāh* and Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqāt*.³ The story itself is well known and need not be repeated here.⁴ The accounts given in our sources differ considerably and Ibn Hishām's report is much more elaborate. Common to both is the following theme: the monk advises Abū Ṭālib to take special care of the young boy, since the Jews are jealous of him and might wish to cause him harm. European authors have cited the story about Bahīra in connection with Sūra 16: 103 to substantiate their view that Muhammad had been under Christian influence from an early age, and sometimes went to the extent of attributing to Bahīra the role of Muhammad's teacher.⁵ Muslim scholars on the other hand had long since critically examined the ways of transmission, through which this episode came into the *sīra*. Shiblī sums up the evaluation of the narration by stating: All the different chains of its authorities are interrupted. That is to say, neither the

first narrator was present at the time of the occurrence, nor does he mention the name of a narrator who was a participant in the event'.⁶

Tirmidhī, who is said to have given the most complete *isnād*, classified this report as *ḥasān* and *gharīb*⁷ and later authorities have judged some parts of the narration to be certainly unauthentic.⁸ The general notion underlying the Bahīra episode nevertheless makes plain the following: a Christian has somehow recognized the coming of the Prophet in the person of Muhammad.

There is another interesting feature in this episode, namely a theme also to be found in the gospel. According to Matthew 2: 4-14, the Jewish king Herod assembled wise men to help him establish the future coming of the new leader. In the stock of symbolical narration the monk and hermit Bahīra certainly represents the figure of the wise man. Although unlike in the gospel, there is no worldly power behind him, wishing to use his knowledge for political ends, in both cases the motive of giving a warning for the protection of the future leader is met with.

3. This is not the place to discuss the value of the various sources on the *sīra*. For an overall view refer to the articles *sīra Waqīdī*, Ibn Hishām, Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Sa'd in the *Et. Ibn Hishām*, the editor of Ishāq's *sīra* died in 213 or 218 H., and Ibn Sa'd, who is said to be more reliable, died in 230 H.
4. See Ibn Hishām, pp.79-81, and Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, pp.134-5.
5. See *SEI*, Art. Bahīra; see also Ibn Hishām, p.180 where it is mentioned that another Christian (Jabr) was said to be the Prophet's teacher. See also Sūra 25: 4; 44: 14.

6. Shībīlī, *Sīratun Nabī*, Vol. 1, p.168.
7. In the terminology employed by the scholars of *hadīth*, and by Tirmidhī in particular, *ḥasān* stands for a *hadīth* not *sahīh*, i.e., it is reliable with a slight mistake in it. The term *gharīb* means that it is considered authentic, but has been reported solely on the authority of a single Companion.
8. Shībīlī, op. cit. Vol. 1, pp.168-9.

The function of the Bahīra episode in the *sīra* therefore seems to be at least of a twofold nature. Firstly, Muhammad's guardian and perhaps his wider family needed to be made aware of the boy's future role, and his protection had to be ensured. Secondly, some sort of authentication of the future prophet's message is here given by a Christian authority in religious matters. We could therefore agree with Christian writers who state that there was a link between Muhammad and Christians or Christianity from his early days, although our understanding of this link would differ from theirs. For us, the episode of Bahīra contains nothing to indicate that the monk was the Prophet's teacher. It is rather that this episode lends support to the view that some earlier Christians understood the role and message of Muhammad differently from their contemporaries and the Christians of today. This view is also met with in the Qur'ān, as explained below.

The Encounter with Waraqā

The second episode in which a Christian plays an 'affirmative' part towards the prophet of Islam also reveals this kind of sympathetic and knowing attitude towards the Prophet and his message. Once again a learned Christian recognizes the prophet in Muhammad and gives some kind of authentication on the basis of the previously-revealed scriptures. We refer of course to the well-known episode when Khadīja, the Prophet's wife, after Muhammad's return from Mount Hirā in a state of bewilderment, consulted Waraqā ibn Nawfal, a relative of hers. This is what Ibn Sa'd sees fit to report:

Then she went to Waraqā ibn Nawfal, and it was the first time that she approached him, and told him what the apostle of Allah (may Allah bless him) had conveyed to her: Thereupon Waraqā said: 'Verily, your uncle's son is truthful and

verily this is the beginning of his prophethood; and that the archangel (*al nāmūs al akbar*) visits him. So tell him that he should not think but good about himself.'⁹

In another version, also in the *Tabaqāt*, Waraqā's reply to Khadīja is as follows:

If he is true, then he is the *nomos* as in the case of Moses. If I am alive when he is commissioned (to prophethood), I shall support him, help him and believe in him.¹⁰

In Ibn Hishām the episode is again somewhat more elaborately described. In various places it is said of Waraqā that he had adopted Christianity, 'and studied its scriptures until he had thoroughly mastered them.'¹¹ There is also a report of a meeting between Waraqā and Muhammad, when the Prophet informs Waraqā about his vision, and Waraqā affirms that Muhammad is the Prophet of his people.¹²

The obvious question, as to why the Prophet of Islam would need some sort of confirmation or authentication of his role by a Christian, has already been dealt with by our early scholars. Shibli also takes up this question and then cites from *Fath al-Bārī*¹³ as follows:

Hāfiẓ Ibn Hajar, while commenting on the first part of this *hadīth*, has referred to an objection raised by some critics: 'Why should a prophet doubt his prophethood?' and 'In case there is

9. Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, pp.225.

10. Ibid, pp.225-6.

11. Ibn Hishām p.99, see also p.83.

12. Ibn Hishām, p.107; a similar report is to be found in the *Sahīh Bukhārī* bāb kaifa kāna bad al-waḥī, Vol. 1, p.4.

13. i.e. al-Asqalānī's commentary of *Sahīh* of Bukhārī. Shibli, Vol. 1, p.189 gives the following reference: *Kitāb al-Ta'bīr*, Vol. XII, p.317 (p.292), Egypt 1325 H. On this page al-Asqalānī mentions Muhammad ibn Kathīr.

such a doubt how can it be removed by an assurance from a Christian?' He has then quoted a reply from a renowned *muhaddith*: 'Prophethood is a great responsibility. One cannot bear its burden all at once. For this reason the Prophet was prepared for it through dreams. On the sudden appearance of the Angel, he was seized with fear, as was but natural for a human being. Hadrat Khadīja allayed his fear, and he gained confidence when he was assured by Waraqā.

The actual words of the said *muhaddith* are:

When he heard his (Waraqā's) words he became convinced of the truth and accepted it.

The said *muhaddith* adds:

The revelations were repeatedly delayed so that he might gradually be prepared to endure the burden.

It may well be that this passage in the original Urdu of Shibli expresses more clearly the reply to the second question also, namely why it should be a Christian who would affirm the Prophet's role. One of the most simple reasons certainly is that Waraqā, being a Christian and a learned one, represented the latest of the scriptures revealed by Allah and it is on the authority of this scripture that he and also Bahīra and some others, as we shall see later, recognize the prophet in Muhammad.

The Hijra to Abyssinia

While the two episodes discussed so far have a direct bearing upon the Prophet himself, the *Hijra* to Abyssinia in the fifth year of prophethood involved a number of the

members of the nascent Muslim community, which at that time consisted of only a few outstandingly brave-hearted and most loyal servants of Allah. Again we shall not repeat all the details given elsewhere but try to draw some conclusions from the events and how they have been presented to us.¹⁴

It was the Prophet himself, who advised some of his followers to whom he could not afford protection from the increasing hostility and persecution by the Quraish, to migrate to Abyssinia, for Muhammad had confidence in the ruler of that country. The reason for the *Hijra* is given by Ibn Hishām in the following brief words:

Thereupon his companions went to Abyssinia, being afraid of apostasy and fleeing to God with their religion.¹⁵

In other words, the Prophet and his early followers believed that in a country ruled by a Christian, Muslims would be safe from persecution and the danger of apostasy. In Ibn Sa'd, whose report on the *Hijra* to Abyssinia is much shorter, the *muhājirūn* confirm that in this Christian country they were allowed to practise their faith and live their lives in peace.¹⁶ The Companions returned to Makka, because they had heard of some reconciliation between Muhammad and the Quraish.¹⁷ This, however, proved to be false

14. For the full narrations on this *Hijra* see Ibn Hishām, p.146 ff., Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.235 ff. p.239 ff.

15. Ibn Hishām, p.146.

16. Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.236; see also Ibn Hishām, p.150.

17. This refers to the rumours that are said to have occurred when Sūra 53: 19-20 were revealed. See Ibn Hishām, p.165 ff., Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.237.

rumour and the persecution of Muslims in Makka increased. According to Ibn Sa'd, the second *Hijra* to Abyssinia then took place and this time the Quraish sent a message to the Negus to return the refugees. In a moving speech the leader of the *muhājirūn*, Ja'far b. Abī Tālib, explained to the king and the assembled clergy what the Prophet had taught them.¹⁸ A passage from *Sūra Maryam* was then recited to the Negus by the Muslims, and the Negus afterwards said:

Of a truth, this and what Jesus¹⁹ brought have come from the same niche.²⁰

When afterwards the crucial question about Jesus and their belief in him was put before them, the Muslims without hiding anything openly declared that Jesus in their view and according to the Prophet's teaching was the servant of God, and His apostle, and His spirit, and His word, which He cast into Mary the blessed virgin. To which the Negus, taking up a stick from the ground, replied: 'By God, Jesus, Son of Mary does not exceed what you have said by the length of this stick.'²¹

In this context it is noteworthy that the following verse from the Qur'ān with a direct bearing upon our theme was revealed when the Negus of Abyssinia later sent a delegation to the Prophet:

You will find that the people most violently hostile towards those who believe are the Jews and those who associate (others with God); while you will find the most affectionate among them towards those who believe are those who say: We are Christians'. That is because some of them are priests and monks; they do not behave proudly.²²

The sentence, *dhālika bi-anна minhum qissīsīnā wa ruhbanan*, has been explained as follows:

It has been said: This came down referring to the Negus and his companions who surrendered (to Islam) with him.²³

and the following lines were added in support:

This meaning is a condensation from the saying of Sa'id b. Jābir upon *Tafsīr al-Tabarī*, Vol. I, p.499 and *al-Durr al-Manthūr*, Vol. II, p.302. Sa'id b. Jābir and as-Sa'di and others have said: It was revealed about the delegation sent by the Negus to the Prophet to hear his word, and to see his qualities, and when they saw him and he read the Qur'ān to them, they surrendered (to Islam) and wept and were humble. Then they returned to the Negus and reported to him...²⁴

18. Ibn Hishām, p.152.

19. Guillaume points out in note 2 that the text in Wüstenfeld's edition has the word Moses in this place, see Ibn Hishām p.152.

20. Ibid., p.152.

21. Ibid., note 3.

22. *Sūra 5: 82*, The Qur'ān: Basic Teachings, p.121.

23. *Tujībī*, Vol. 1, p.152.

24. Ibid., note 3.

This verse, when seen in its historical context, does not seem to be meant as a general statement characterizing Christians as such as being nearest to Muslims. Rather, as the *tafsīr* indicated, a very particular group of Christians is here referred to, namely a delegation sent by the Negus of Abyssinia, consisting of perhaps only 12 persons, seven of whom are said to have been *ruhbān*, and five *qissiṣīn*.²⁵ It should also be taken into account that Sūra 3: 199²⁶ following the classical exegesis cannot be interpreted as accepting a group of righteous believers among the Christians, who are a party of *ahl al-kitāb*, for although this verse is also said to refer to the delegation of the Negus,²⁷ it is clear that they are mentioned here because, as the exegete puts it: 'they had already believed.'²⁸

25. *al-Tujībī*, Vol. 1, pp.152-3. For *rahbāniyya* see Sūra 57: 27, which says that it was invented by the Christians themselves, not being ordained by Allah. In this place *rahbāniyya* is explained as abstention from women, retreat to hermitages, etc., see *Tujībī*, Vol. II, p.337, while for Sūra 5: 82 'al-*ruhbān*' is simply clarified by the words 'those who fear Allah', see *Tujībī*, Vol. 1, pp.152-3.

Also the commentary on the following verses (Sūra 5: 83) makes it clear that the Christians referred to in this place are the delegation of the Negus and that they had accepted Islam, see *Tujībī*, Vol. 1, p.153.

26. 'And lo! Of the people of the scripture there are some who believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto you and that which was revealed unto them, humbling themselves before Allah. They purchase not a trifling gain at the price of the revelations of Allah. Verily their reward is with their Lord, and lo! Allah is swift to take account.'

27. See *Tujībī*, Vol. 1, p.97.

28. 'Wa qad kana amana', *Tujībī*, Vol. 1, p.97. A distinction between various groups of the *ahl al-kitāb* is also made in Sūras: 3: 75 ('Among the people of the scripture there is he who, if thou trust him with a weight of treasure, will return it to thee. And among them there is he who, if thou trust him with a piece of gold, will not return it to thee unless thou keep standing over him. That is because they say: We have no duty to the Gentiles. They speak a lie concerning Allah knowingly'). The sentence, *la isāfa tālīnā fi l-ummīyīna sabīlin*, is explained as: 'The Jews used to say: there is no wrong for us in what came on us of the belongings of the Arabs' (*Tujībī*, Vol. 1, p.82) making clear that the general statement about some of the *ahl al-kitāb* comes from a particular Jewish practice towards non-Jews.

Messages to the Rulers

While in Madina, the Prophet had sent a number of letters to the rulers of various tribes and nations. Although not all of them were addressed to Christians, three of the most prominent recipients were the Christian rulers of Byzantium, Egypt and Abyssinia. These messages were sent from Madina in 7 H., i.e. after the treaty of Hudaibiya, together with a similar letter to the ruler of Iran. The *sahīhāin* contain lengthy reports on the Prophet's message to Heraclius (Heraclius), inviting him to accept Islam.²⁹ There is an amazing feature in this narration, namely that the first *rāwī* in the *isnād* is Abū Sufyān, the well-known Makkan leader and opponent of Muḥammad who says that he was present at the court of Heraclius at the very time when Muḥammad's message was received. It is Abū Sufyān who, according to his report, happens to be questioned by the ruler of Byzantium, and through whose mouth the message of Islam is proclaimed - involuntarily it seems, for Abu Sufyān is at the time still Muḥammad's enemy but is compelled to answer the questions put to him about Muḥammad and his message.

Heraclius then read the letter of the Prophet which, according to the *sahīhāin* consisted of an invitation to Islam, concluded by the Qur'ānic injunction of Sūra 3: 64.³⁰

29. *Sahīh Muslim*, Vol. III, pp.969-71. *Bukhārī* gives the full account in Vol. I, pp.7-14 and remarks on it in Vol. V, p.507 and Vol. VI, pp.56-62 (i.e. *Kitāb al-tafsīr*). See also Ibn Hishām, p.652 ff., and, Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.304 ff., Ahmad b. Hanbal, Vol. 1, pp.262-3.

30. 'Say: O people of the scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for Lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him)'; see also *Mukhtasar ibn Kathīr*, Vol. 1, pp.289-90.

The emperor was inclined to make his people accept Islam, but had to give in to some strong opposition.³¹

The head of the Copts in Egypt, a country under Byzantium's dominion at that time, had also received such a message from the Prophet. He however politely declined to accept Islam and sent some presents to the Prophet together with two women, one of them being Māriyah al-Qibtiyah, who later gave birth to the Prophet's only son, who died at a very early age.³² The Negus of Abyssinia had, as reported in Ibn Hishām, embraced Islam and sent a letter to the Prophet confirming this.³³ In Ibn Sa'd it is said that the letter by which the Negus was invited to become a Muslim, 'contained the verses of the Qur'ān'.³⁴

The Deputation from Najrān

The incident of a Christian deputation coming from Najrān to Madina to the Prophet's mosque is perhaps the most impressive Christian-Muslim encounter during the Prophet's lifetime.³⁵ 'The Prophet's companions who saw them that day said that they never saw their like in any deputation that came afterwards.'³⁶ We shall therefore give a more detailed account of this event.

Najrān was a big settlement to the south of Makka, not far from Ma'rib in the Yemen. It must have been the centre of Central Arabian Christianity. Shibli quotes the Arab poet A'shā³⁷ who mentions the Najrān Ka'ba, which was a splendid church built by the Christian population of Najrān: 'A journey to the Najrān Ka'ba is a duty laid on thee so that thou mayest whisper thy prayers at its gates....'³⁸ The story about the deputation from Najrān is referred to by Bukhārī in the following words:

'Narrated by Hudhaifa: al-Aqīb and Saiyid, the rulers of Najrān came to Allah's apostle with the intention of

31. Ṣahīḥ al-Bukhārī, Vol. 1, p.13. Ibn Hishām is more detailed and gives a vivid picture of the turmoil that arose when Byzantines were requested by their head of state to embrace Islam. One of their bishops, who pleaded for accepting Muhammad as the expected prophet, was beaten to death. Also mentioned is a letter received upon request from religious authorities in Byzantium, stating that Muhammad is the Prophet who was expected to come. All this however did not convince the Byzantines, who did not wish to be ruled by the desert Arabs; see Ibn Hishām, p.656. In Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.306 the scene is described as follows: 'The Byzantines said: "What is it, your majesty?" He said: "Follow this Arabian prophet". He (the narrator) said: They ran away like wild asses, snorting and with their crosses raised.'

32. See Ibn Hishām, p.653; Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.307.

33. Ibn Hishām, p.657.

34. Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.305.

35. Although it is true that a number of delegations came from areas with Christian populations such as the Yemen and Bahrain, no other place in the Arabian peninsula was as Christian in nature as Najrān and, to my knowledge, no other place was Christian in the sense that both the majority of its people and the ruling élite were adherents to Christianity.

36. Ibn Hishām, p.271.

37. For A'shā see Nicholson, ..., pp.123-5.

38. Shibli, Vol. II, p.43.

doing *li'an*. One of them said to the other: "Do not do (this *li'an*), for by Allah, if he is a prophet and we do this *li'an*, neither we nor our offspring after us will be successful." Then both of them said (to the Prophet): "We will give whatever you ask, but you should send a trustworthy man with us and do not send any person with us but an honest man who is really trustworthy." Then every one of the companions of the Apostle wished to be that one. Then the Prophet said: "Get up, O Abū 'Ubāida ibn al-Jarrā."³⁹

When he got up, Allah's apostle said: 'This is the trustworthy man of this Muslim nation.'⁴⁰

Consulting other collections of *ahadīth* we find more details that help us to form a more complete picture of the matter. As reported in Tirmidhī's *Jāmi'*, a man named Mughīra b. Shu'ba had been sent⁴¹ by the Prophet to the people

of Najrān, who asked him why the Muslims and thus the Qur'ān referred to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the sister of Hārūn and Moses. To this Mughīra did not reply, and when he returned to Madina, he inquired from the Prophet about this matter. The explanation given by the Prophet is of course most reasonable and one wonders why even today some people raise the objection that Muhammad, as they put it, did not know the Christian scriptures well enough and therefore placed Mary and Moses in one and the same generation,⁴² while the Prophet himself had already almost 1400 years ago replied to that very same ill-founded comment upon Sūra 19: 28.⁴²

The actual *sīra* literature provides us with further details. Ibn Hishām explains that the deputation from Najrān was made up of 60 riders, 14 of them being noblemen. The three prominent figures among them were 'Abdul-Masih, a political leader from Najrān, al-Ayham, an administrator, and Abū Hāritha b. 'Alqama their bishop, scholar and religious leader. The latter is then described as a knowledgeable Christian scholar, honoured and paid by the

39. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Vol. V, pp.469-70.

40. Compare the Arabic text of Muslim (Vol. VI, p.171), (a), with the Arabic text of Tirmidhī (Vol. IV, p.376), (b): (a) 'an al-Mughīra b. Shu'ba qāl lammā qadimtu Najrāna sa' alāni faqālū innakum taqra'ūna yā ukht hārūn....(b) 'an al-Mughīra b. Shu'ba qāl ba'athān rasūlu-lلāhi ilā Najrān faqālū lī a lastum taqra-ūna ya ukht harūn.....

Note the importance of the root (*ba'atha*) which changes the whole picture by implying that Mughīra had been sent to Najrān by the Prophet himself and did not just accidentally arrive there. Comparing the *asnād* of both Muslim and Tirmidhī, we find them identical up to Ibn Idrīs, giving three transmitters between him and al-Mughīra, the original narrator. Muslim has this *hadīth* with (*lammā qadimtu najrāna*) through four different *rāwīs* after Ibn Idrīs (see Vol. VI, p.171), while Tirmidhī gives only two different names between Ibn Idrīs and himself, who are however among those four named by Muslim. The wording in Muslim and Tirmidhī is nevertheless slightly different, and Tirmidhī adds to the *hadīth*: 'This is a *ḥasan gharīb* *hadīth* that we know only from the report of Ibn Idrīs' (Vol. IV, p.376 - for *ḥasan gharīb* see note 7 of this paper).

41. See e.g. Lammens, H., Islam, Beliefs and Institutions, London, 1968, pp.50-1.

42. The reply of the Prophet is to be found in the *hadīth* mentioned above, which is, in the version of Muslim (Vol. III, p.1169) as follows: 'al-Mughīra b. Shu'ba reported: "When I came to Najran, they asked me: You read 'O sister of Hārūn', in the Qur'ān whereas Moses was born before Jesus. When I came back to Allah's messenger (may peace be upon him) I asked him about that, whereupon he said: 'The people (of old ages) used to give names (to their persons) after the names of apostles and pious persons who had gone before them.' " Even the crown of Western scholarship on Islam, i.e. the *El*, is not clear on this matter, and either does not know or does not wish to take this *hadīth* into account; see Art. Maryam, in *SEI*, pp.327-30.

Christian kings of Byzantium. The bishop does in fact recognize the prophet in Muḥammad but will not accept him. The following words are attributed to him, explaining his refusal to accept Muḥammad as Allah's prophet:

The way these people have treated us! They have given us titles, paid us subsidies and honoured us. But they are absolutely opposed to him, and if I were to accept him, they would take away from us all that you see.⁴³

While in Madina, the Christians from Najrān were permitted by the Prophet to use his mosque for their prayers.

The time of their prayers having come, they stood and prayed in the apostle's mosque, and he said that they were to be left to do so. They prayed towards the East.⁴⁴

Ibn Hishām then briefly explains their religious doctrine, summing up the arguments they had brought forward to substantiate their claim that God was three in one. Also the Prophet's reply to them is reported and the revelation of 'more than eighty verses'⁴⁵ Sūra Al 'Imrān, is placed in this context. This event is also discussed briefly by Nīsābūrī when introducing his chapter on Sūra Al 'Imrān. He says:

The Sayid and al-'Aqīb addressed Allah's messenger and he said to them: 'Surrender (to Islam)'. They said: 'We have already surrendered

before'. He said: 'You are lying. Your calling Allah a son keeps you from Islam, your worshipping the cross, and your eating pork.' They said: 'If Jesus is not Allah's son, who is then his father?', and they argued about Jesus, so Allah's messenger said to them: 'Do you know that there is no child not resembling his father?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Do you not know that our Lord is living and does not die, and that Jesus passed away?'⁴⁶ They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Do you not know that our Lord takes care of everything, guards it and sustains it?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Does Jesus do any of these things?' They said: 'No'. He said: 'Our Lord formed Jesus in the womb, as he wished, and our Lord, he does not eat, nor drink nor talk?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Do you not know that Jesus' mother carried him, as any woman carries (a child), then she gave birth to him, as any woman gives birth to her child, then she fed him, as a child is fed, then he ate, drank, talked?' They said: 'Yes'. He said: 'How is it then as you claim?' Then

43. Ibn Hishām, p.271.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., p.272.

46. Ibid.

they were silent. Then Allah the Mighty and High sent down into his chest Sūra Āl 'Imrān, no less than eighty verses of it.⁴⁷

Ibn Hishām cites a considerable number of these verses and also explains them. The whole sequence is closed with the Qur'ānic words:

Then say: Come, let us summon our sons and your sons, our wives and your wives, ourselves and yourselves, then let us pray earnestly and invoke God's curse upon the liars.⁴⁸

This is what Nisābūrī says about the verse:

Two Najrān monks came to Allah's messenger and he said to them: 'Surrender (to Islam)!' So they said: 'We have already surrendered before.' He said: 'You are lying, your bowing to the cross keeps you from Islam, and your words "Allah has taken a son" and your drinking wine.' Then they said: 'What do you say about Jesus?' He said: 'Allah's messenger was silent and the Qur'ān came down. This (which) we recite unto thee is a revelation and a wise reminder⁴⁹ up to His words: (say, Come! We will summon our sons and your sons), and the rest

of the verse,⁵⁰ and Allah's messenger called both of them for mutual invoking of curses. And he said: And he came with Hasan and Husain and Fātimah, and his people and offspring (peace be on them). He said: And when the two came out from him, one of them said to his companion: 'agree to tribute,⁵¹ and do not enter with him in cursing', and he agreed to tribute. He said: They returned and said: 'We agree⁵² to tribute and do not invoke curses with you.'⁵³

There is a similar account added to this one, stating that the two monks were al-'Aqīb and al-Sayid, and that the Prophet also took out Alī with him.⁵³

The Prophet, having received the revelation, summoned the deputation from Najrān and told them to begin the invocation of curses. Here is where the above-mentioned *ḥadīth* from Bukhārī comes in.⁵⁴ Ibn Hishām explains that there were certain financial matters in dispute among the people from Najrān, and they therefore wanted the Prophet to nominate a trustworthy person as arbitrator for them. Ibn Sa'd's account this time differs very little from that of Ibn Hishām. According to the former, the Prophet had sent a written message to Najrān before the arrival of the deputation, and it is perhaps at this time that al-Mughīra was sent and arrived at Najrān. After the deputation of fourteen had performed their prayers in the Prophet's mosque they went before him. Muhammad, however, refused to talk to them. Upon 'Umar's advice the Christians then changed

47. Ibid.

48. Ibn Hishām, p.272. Sūra 3: 61.

49. Sūra 3: 58.

50. Sūra 3: 61.

51. Jizya.

52. Nisābūrī, p.58, quoted without isnād.

53. Ibid., pp.58-9.

54. See above, pp.23-4, and Bukhārī, Vol. V, pp.469-70.

their richly ornamented dresses and 'next morning they came in the dress of monks and greeted him. He responded and invited them to embrace Islam. They declined and there ensued a long discourse and arguments. He recited the Qur'ān before them and said to them: "If you contradict what I say then come, we will curse each other".⁵⁵ The rest is as in Ibn Hishām and Bukhārī, although the reason given for their abstaining from mutual cursing is not mentioned in Ibn Sa'd. He, however, gives some details about the treaty between the Muslims and the people of Najrān that resulted from their declining both Islam and *lī'ān*:

A fixed amount of garments or silver was to be handed over to the Muslims, and some weapons provided for them in case of a conflict with Yemen. The people of Najrān were placed under the protection of Allah and His Prophet and their souls, creed, land, property and churches were to be safe. 'No bishop will be displaced from his bishopric, no monk from his monastery, and no testator (*wāqif*) from the property of his endowment.'⁵⁶

Ibn Sa'd furthermore adds that al-Sayyid and al-'Aqīb after a short stay in Najrān returned to Madina to embrace Islam. The treaty between the Muslims and the people of Najrān was upheld by both parties till the death of the Prophet, and then confirmed by Abū Bakr. In the time of 'Umar the people of Najrān started charging interest, which, according to Ibn Sa'd, gave 'Umar the right to expel them from their land, giving them a letter of protection which

stated that 'no Muslim will harm them, honouring what the apostle and also Abū Bakr had written for them'.⁵⁷ Some of them later settled in Iraq under favourable circumstances.

The Expedition to Tabuk

Before ending our review, we should perhaps take notice of Sūra 9: 29 and consider the context in which it was revealed. The verse is as follows:

Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the last day, and forbid not what Allah hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low.⁵⁸

The *Mukhtasar tafsīr* Ibn Kathir says about this verse:

The matter of fighting against the *ahl al-kitāb* had first been sent down after the matters of the *mushrikūn* had been settled, and mankind entered Allah's religion in troops,⁵⁹ and it had been established in the Arab peninsula. Allah and His messenger ordered fighting the people of the two scriptures, the Jews and the Christians, and that was in the year 9. Therefore Allah's messenger prepared for fighting Rum and calmed the people for this and made it plain to them.

55. Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.419.

56. Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.419; see also p.314.

57. Ibid., p.420.

58. It is said that this verse has abrogated Sūra 3: 111; see Salama, p.30.

59. A paraphrase of Sūra 110: 2.

He sent to the Arab tribes around Madina and gathered about 3000 troops, and some people of Madina and its surrounding *munāfiqūn* and others stayed behind, and this was in a drought year, the period of aridity and heat, and Allah's messenger left intending to go to Syria to fight Rûm. Then he reached Tabûk⁶⁰ and halted there, staying for about twenty days. Then he requested Allah's guidance about returning to Madina and he returned because of the circumstances and the weakness of the people.⁶¹

PART II: THREE PERSPECTIVES

Human existence, it has been rightly suggested, is possible only within the fold of society, and living together in society means to meet set standards and to observe accepted patterns and rules, resulting in the limitation of individual liberty. The standards, patterns and rules in society are determined by the prevailing laws (and vice versa), and behind those laws there is the ideology, leaving its imprint on both law and society.

We shall now draw some conclusions from the material presented in our review, and it is due to this understanding of society, law and ideology that we intend to discuss matters in three perspectives, namely the theological (ideology-) perspective, the legal (law-) perspective and the societal (society-) perspective. Since Muslims consciously assert that both their law and their society are derived from and function according to their belief-system (their ideology), we are justified in first looking into the theological perspective. Secondly, we shall then group together both the legal and the societal perspectives, since they are closely interrelated and both bear the imprint of the belief-system.¹

The Theological Perspective

It is clear from the verses of the Qur'ân already discussed that the Christian's belief deviates from that of the

60. For more details, see Ibn Hishâm, p.602 ff and Ibn Sa'd, Vol. II, pp.203-8.

61. *Mukhtaṣar tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Vol. II, pp.135-6.

1. This close interrelation has led ignorant outsiders to call Islam and Muslims 'legalistic'. The close interrelation is however due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslims still try to practise in everyday affairs, what the revelation brought to them. If this were true for Christians and Jews, they also would be 'legalistic' in this sense.

Muslim on at least two important issues. Firstly, the objection is raised by the Qur'an that Christians have broken the principle of *tawhid* and attributed a son to Allah, the only God.² The other point is that Christians would not accept another prophet after Jesus, who according to their understanding has brought the 'history of salvation' to an end, and thus they reject Muhammad as Allah's prophet. It is also obvious that according to Islamic standards both are an alteration of the original Christian teachings, since we found that a considerable number of early Christians adhered to what Muhammad taught about Jesus,³ and also expected a prophet to come after Jesus.⁴ The Qur'an says very plainly that those Christians who attribute a son to Allah, have become *kuffar*.⁵ On the other hand some verses, such as Sura 2: 62⁶ here dealt with in place of some others of similar content, seem to suggest that all believers may look forward to the Day of Judgement without fear and are thus somehow justified. However a closer look into the matter forces us to differentiate, and in Tabari's *tafsir* such a differentiation is already made within the first few lines of commentary on this verse:

'Concerning (those who believe) they are those who see Allah's messenger as trustworthy in what he has brought to them of Allah's truth. Their belief in it is their believing consent to what has been laid down already by that what has preceded of this our scripture of revelation.'⁷ Tabari then continues with detailed etymological information on the 'Jews', 'Christians' and 'Sabeans'.⁸ The sentence, *man āmana bi-llāhi wa'l-yāumi'l-ākhiri wa 'amila sālihan falahum ajruhum 'inda rabbihim*, is explained as follows:

'Abu Ja'far says of the meaning of the words "who believes in Allah and the Last Day": those who see Allah as true and accept the waking after death on the day of resurrection (and do right), and obey Allah, (their reward is with their Lord)? The words "their reward is with their Lord" mean: for them a reward for their righteous deeds from their Lord.'¹⁰ After replying to the question where the verse under discussion actually ends, Tabari, for the sake of clarification takes up another related issue, namely:

'It has been asked: how does the believer believe? We

2. See above, pp. 25-7.

3. See above, p.14.

4. See above p.10 ff., also pp.20, 22 and 26.

5. See Qur'an, Sura 5: 17: 'They have indeed disbelieved who say: Lo! Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary ...'

6. 'Lo! Those who believe in that which is revealed unto thee Muhammad and those who are Jews, and Christians and Sabeans - who ever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doth right, surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall be no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve'.

7. Tabari, *tafsir*, Vol. 1, p.242.

8. He says that the name of the Jews (*al-yahud*) is derived from their declaration to turn in repent (Arabic: *höda*) to God; the Christians (*an-nasrä*) are said to give each other help (Arabic: *näsrä*), and the Sabeans are said to worship angels, to read psalms and to pray in a qibla, see Tabari, *tafsir*, Vol. 1, pp.242-3.

9. i.e. Tabari.

10. Tabari, *tafsir*, Vol. 1, p.243.

have said to this:

The meaning of belief here is not the one involved in changing from one religion to another, as for example of a Jew or Christian changing to belief.¹¹ That is why it has been said already: those of the people of the scripture with belief in Jesus and what he brought¹² are obedient with it, until they perceive Muhammad, believe in him and hold him as truthful. It has been said of those who believe in Jesus and what he brought: when they perceive Muhammad, they believe in Muhammad and what he brought.¹³ However, the meaning of belief here is the believer's staunchness in his belief and his firm adherence to it. As far as the belief of the Jews, Christians and Sabeans is concerned, it means accepting Muhammad and what he brought as truthful.¹⁴ Who of them believes in Muhammad, in what he brought, in the Last Day, and does not move away from it and does not change it, until he dies, for him there is certainly recompense of his deeds and reward with his Lord.¹⁵

For further illustration we include here just one of many narrations added by Tabarī to support his view: 'Salman al-Farsi'¹⁶ asked the Prophet about those Christians and what it is about their deeds. The Prophet said: "They do not die in Islam."¹⁷ Then Salman said: "So there is injustice done to them on earth", and he mentioned their striving. Then this verse was revealed, and the Prophet called Salman and said: "This verse has been revealed because of your companions". Then the Prophet said: "The one who dies in the faith of Jesus, dies in Islam, until he has heard of me, and he is sound. And the one who heard of me this very day and does not believe in me, he has already perished."¹⁸

We would therefore conclude that in the theological perspective, our view of Christians has to be that those who attribute a son to Allah or say that Allah is Jesus, the son of Mary, are disbelievers and will be losers in the Hereafter. This also applies to those who reject Muhammad as Allah's prophet, *wa llahu a'lam*.

11. i.e. belief in Muhammad as Allah's messenger.

12. i.e. the *injil*.

13. i.e. Qur'an; this is probably referring to Sura 5: 83.

14. Tabarī, *tafsīr* Vol. 1, p.243.

15. See also the *hadīth* in Muslim: 'By Him in whose hands is the life of Muhammad, he who amongst the community of Jews or Christians hears about me but does not affirm his belief in that which I have been sent, and dies in this state (of disbelief) he shall be but one of the denizens of Hell-fire' (*Sahīh Muslim*, Vol. 1, p.91).

16. He was of Persian origin and came as a slave to Madina where he recognized the prophethood of Muhammad and converted from Christianity to Islam, see Ibn Sa'd (Arabic), Vol. IV, p.53. See also Ibn Hishām, pp.95-8.

17. i.e. they are not Muslims.

18. Tabarī, *tafsīr* Vol. 1, p.246, quoted without isnād.

The Legal Perspective

Although Christians breaking the principle of *tawḥīd* and rejecting the prophethood of Muhammad are to be considered as disbelievers from the theological perspective, the Qur'ān rules that other laws should apply to them in this world than to the *mushrikūn*, since Christians belong to the *ahl al-kitāb*. It should be noted that from the legal perspective there is nothing to enhance the position of Christians over the position of other *ahl al-kitāb*, such as Jews and Sabeans, and all regulations that apply to the latter are also valid for the former.

While the question discussed above was whether two various belief-systems could be conceived as legitimately co-existing, the question here is about the possible co-existence of various criteria of a moral and legal nature. This second question is answered positively by the Qur'ān in contrast to the question related to various beliefs. Sūra 5: 48 explains the actual existence of various religious groups, namely those with a scripture of revelations as something willed by Allah, and as a reason 'to vie one to another with good works'. It is said expressly in this verse:

To each we have pointed out a divine law and
a traced out way.¹⁹

Tabari firstly explains the meaning of some words²⁰ and then introduces two different views on *li-kullin ja'alnā minkum*.

19. Sūra 5: 48.

20. *Shir'a* (divine law) is explained, with *al-shar'i'a*, and *minhaj* (traced out way), as *al-tarīqu'l-bayyinu'l-wādihi*, i.e. the open clear path; Tabari, *tafsīr*, Vol. VI, p.155.

'Then the exegites are of different opinions about the meaning of this verse. Some of them say: It means the adherents of various communities,²¹ i.e. Allah has set up for each community a law and a way.'²² After giving a number of narrations in support of this view, Tabari continues:

'Others say: No, it means the community²³ of Muhammad. They say that the meaning of the sentence was: We have already made the book, which we sent down upon Our Prophet Muhammad, O mankind, for everyone of you, i.e. who enters Islam and confesses about Muhammad; He is for me a prophet!, as a law and way.'²⁴ Tabari then summarizes: 'According to my view the first of the two explanations is correct, the explanation giving the meaning: for all people of the religious communities,²⁵ communities²⁶ we have set up a law and a way. We say that the first is right because of the words of Allah, *wa lau shā'a laja'a alakum ummatan wāhidatan*.²⁷ If the words *likullin ja'alnā minkum* had referred to Muhammad's community - and they are one single community - the words *wa lau shā'a laja'a alakum ummatan wāhidatan* would not have been given, but Allah has given them and made them one single community. The meaning is therefore clear. However, the meaning of what the message from Allah to His prophet Muhammad brings is as follows: Allah mentions what has been prescribed to the people of Israel in the Torah, and what deeds were

21. Arabic: *milāt*.

22. Tabari, *tafsīr*, Vol. VI, p.155.

23. Arabic: *ummā*.

24. Tabari, *tafsīr*, Vol. VI, p.156.

25. Arabic: *ahl al-milāt*.

26. Arabic: *Ummā*.

27. Again Sūra 5: 48 (Had Allah willed He could have made you one community).

laid upon them. Then He mentions that He made Isā b. Maryam follow the steps of the prophets before him, and sent the *Injīl* upon him, and he ordered him who followed him to do the works prescribed therein. Then He mentions our Prophet Muhammad and says of him that the book came upon him in truth, as the books before, and he ordered the deeds mentioned therein. The judgement of what has been sent down upon him is different from the other books, and He explains that He has already set up for Muhammad and his community a different law than that of the previous prophets and communities, and that his religion and their religion are one with regard to *tawhīd* of Allah, and observing what He ordered and prohibited. And they are different with regard to that which has been prescribed for each of them and his community, and what has been made legal and prohibited for them.'²⁸

It is thus clear that, seen from the legal perspective, Christians are entitled to have their own prescriptions. This view is further supported by the Prophet's practice of following the *ahl al-kitāb* in such matters that are not prohibited for Muslims by Allah and not specifically regulated for them either. There are two *ahadīth* commonly quoted in support of this practice by the Prophet:

Narrated Ibn 'Abbās: 'The Prophet used to copy the

people of the scriptures in matters in which there was no order from Allah. The people of the scriptures used to let their hair hang down, while the pagans used to part their hair. So the Prophet let his hair hang down first, but later he parted it.'²⁹ The other *hadīth* is as follows: 'Ibn 'Abbās said that when God's messenger fasted on the day of *āshūrā* and commanded that it should be observed as a fast, he was told that it was a day held in honour by Jews and Christians, and said: "If I am spared till next year, I shall fast on the ninth."'³⁰

The positive approach that Muslims have towards Christians in the legal perspective stems from the fact that *ahl al-kitāb*³¹ differ from the other disbelievers in that they have a common stock of legal prescriptions with Muslims, which others do not have. The limits are however also clearly defined between the various communities, as shown in Tabari's commentary above. Nevertheless in the legal (and in the societal) perspective Muslims and Christians (as *ahl al-kitāb*) are close enough to each other to allow Muslim men to marry Christian women, and to share the Christian's food in so far as it is good.³²

29. *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, Vol. VII, p.525.

30. *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīh*, Vol. II, p.434.

31. We said before that in the legal perspective Christians are but *ahl al-kitāb*.

32. See Qur'ān, Sūra 5: 5. The Prophet himself took Mariyah al-Qibtiyah as his wife (see p.20) and also married a Jewess. Both women, however, are also said to have embraced Islam.

28. Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. VI, p.156.

The Societal Perspective

Having noted that Muslims referring to the Qur'ān and the Sunna would have to see Christians as disbelievers from the theological viewpoint, but as different from other disbelievers in the legal perspective, it should not surprise us that in the societal context a twofold approach to Christians needs to be adopted. Following the rules laid down in the Qur'ān and the Sunna, Christians due to their disbelief need to be called to Islam, and that is what the Prophet did in various ways during his lifetime.³³ Even in the case of individuals, the Prophet entered into dialogue with the aim of presenting the truth to the misguided.³⁴

33. See above, pp.19, 20 etc.

34. This is what Ibn Kathir reports above Sūra 9: 31 "... and His word (they have) taken their rabbis, and their monks and the Messiah, son of Mary, as Lords beside Allah). Imām Ahmad and at-Tirmidhī reported from 'Adī b. Ḥatīm: When the call of Allah's messenger reached him he fled to Syria, and he had already become a Christian during the Jāhilīya, and his sister and a group of his people had been taken prisoners. Then Allah's messenger showed kindness to his sister and set her free. She returned to her brother, and she wanted him in Islam, and to approach Allah's messenger. So 'Adī came to Madina, and he was the leader of his people, Tā'ī, and his father was Ḥatīm al-Tā'ī, famous for his generosity, and the people reported about his bravery. He entered the presence of Allah's messenger and on the neck of 'Adī was a cross of silver, and he read the following verse (they have taken their rabbis and their monks as Lords beside Allah ...). He said: 'So I said: 'They do not worship them.' He said: 'Indeed they prohibit the permissible for them and allow them the prohibited, and they make them follow them, and is that not worshipping them?' And Allah's messenger said: 'O 'Adī, what do you say? Does it not suffice you it being said Allāhu Akbar? Do you know anything greater than Allah? Does it not suffice you it being said Išā illā illā illāh? Do you know any other god beside Allah?' Then he called him to Islam, and be surrendered (to Islam) and gave witness with the shahādah of truth. He said: 'And I saw his face rejoice', then he said: 'Indeed the Jews suffer anger, the Christians are astray.' " (Mukhtasar tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, Vol. II, p.138; the last sentence is a paraphrase of Sūra 1: 17).

On the other hand, Christians being *ahl al-kitāb* may not be harassed or molested for being non-Muslims. It is true that the Qur'ān warns against taking Jews or Christians as friends,³⁵ but that does not mean they should be molested or harmed because of their being non-Muslims. It is also true that the Qur'ān and the Prophet called for war against the *ahl al-kitāb* and against the Christians in particular.³⁶ However, this occurred only after the message sent by the Prophet had not been properly responded to, and the set pattern for the termination of a war with *ahl al-kitāb*, and thus with Christians, is coming to terms as indicated in Sūra 9: 29, and as practised in the Prophet's lifetime with the Christians from Nahrān, who preferred to submit.³⁷

The other side of the Muslim approach towards Christians, apart from calling them to Islam, would then be best described as accepting them to be a group of people with their own ideas and ways - this provided they are not posing any danger to the Muslims. Where they present a danger, they have to be fought. The reason for fighting them is only this harmfulness, not their laws and not even because their beliefs are different from those of the Muslims, for as Allah says in the Qur'ān: 'There is no compulsion in religion.'³⁸

35. See Sūra 5: 51, also Sahīb Muslim, Vol. III, p.1156; Mishkāt, Vol. III, p.973.

36. See above, p.30.

37. See the Prophet's letter to Yohannah, Ibn Rubbah and the people of Aylah, saying: 'I will not fight against you, unless I write to you (in advance). So join the fold of Islam or pay the jizyah ...'; see Ibn Sa'd, Vol. 1, p.328.

38. Sūra 2: 256.

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